

Letter to the editor of *Waterways Journal*, Re: Captain Grant Marsh

“In July 1907, Marsh resigned his position with the Benton Co., and on Aug. 23, he went aboard his former boat, the *Expansion*, and confronted the pilot, William R. Massie. Massie charged Marsh with assault, and at a hearing of the Department of Commerce and Labor, his license was revoked on Dec. 8.”

Bismarck Tribune, May 1, 2011

The following is a ranting editorial letter written by Grant Marsh’s biographer, Joseph Mills Hanson, in April 1908 to *Waterways Journal* in public protest of the denial of the renewal of Marsh’s pilot’s license by the Duluth District steamboat inspectors. This copy in the MNRR archives, from an unknown source, appears to be a photocopy of a marked-up draft.

Seven years after this incident, at the age of 82, Marsh found himself lacking the mental and physical agility to pilot a steamboat at a special ceremony. He died within a year.

St. Louis, Mo., April 27, 1908

The Editor, Waterways Journal,
St. Louis, Mo.

Dear Sir:-

It was ^{^with^} astonishment and indignation that I read the news, contained in the issue of the Waterways Journal of April 25th, 1908, that the steamboat inspectors of the Duluth District have refused to renew the license of Captain Grant Marsh as master and pilot, on the ground that they "believe Captain Marsh's character to be such as not to entitle him to the license he applied for."

It seems scarcely credible that officials in full possession of their faculties can refuse a man of the high standing and past brilliant record of Captain Marsh the right to engage in the pursuit of his profession on so false and utterly untenable a charge. It is only charitable to assume that the Inspectors, in arriving at their decision, have been deceived and misled by others whose ill-will toward Captain Marsh may arise either from professional envy or personal malice. On no other assumption than that they have been misinformed concerning the facts can their action be excused; their injustice toward Captain Marsh would, on any other grounds, inevitably (illegible erasure) to their duties as officials and contemptible as men.

It has been my privilege and pleasure to enjoy the intimate friendship of Captain Marsh for a number of years past. Though I am not qualified by actual experience to give an expert opinion upon the ~~qualifications~~ *proficiency* of Captain Marsh as a master and pilot, as I understand the case ~~these are~~ *this* is not called into question. If ~~they~~ *it* were, I personally have heard and read enough expressions of admiration and praise for his remarkable abilities as a steamboatman by some of the most famous soldiers, pioneers, and public men of the United States, as well as by many other eminent captains and pilots, to effectually quell any such questions forever. But by reason of a close

association of long standing I am amply qualified to testify as to his character. In doing so I need say no more than that, among a somewhat wide circle of acquaintances, I know no man whose moral purity, absolute honesty, and broad generosity, both in judgement upon others and in ~~physical~~ actual liberality, can exceed those of Captain Grant Marsh. I have never seen him angry, uncharitable, or harsh, though I can well believe that if driven to an extreme he both could and would defend his person or his good name with uncommon courage. He is a simple, straightforward gentleman in every sense of the term, and that he would maliciously do a wrong to any man or suffer a moral lapse of any other description after he has attained to his years and standing through a life-time of upright living, is simply inconceivable. If one were to suggest such a possibility to any of his hundreds of friends and acquaintances throughout the Northwest, in fact throughout the Missouri and Mississippi valleys, they would laugh in his face.

Can the Duluth Inspectors, then, either as men or as officials afford to hide behind so flimsy an excuse for depriving him of his means of livelihood? There is one fact which they may not realize now but which it would be well for them to take into account; it is, that justice is never defeated. Sooner or later it will win, and those who attempt to stay it by falsehood and petty tyranny will have only themselves to thank if they suffer when the reckoning is made. Half of France strove with calumny and intrigue and ^{^physical^} torture to compass the ruin of ~~Isaac~~ Alfred Dreyfus. But justice dogged their footsteps and in the end he was vindicated, while they were buried in the pit they had dugged for him.

In this American republic of ours, few cases of injustice can go long unatoned for; there are too many means of righting the wrongs, too many millions of right-thinking people who resent them and cry out for their punishment. It makes no difference whether the victim be high or low, rich or poor, powerful or weak; if only the matter be agitated, justice will work night and day, silently, persistently, until her inexorable demands are heard and heeded by those who are commissioned by the people to administer justice to all alike.

The Duluth Inspectors, upon the face of the case, appear to have constituted themselves judge and jury to pass upon the moral rectitude of Grant Marsh and to irrevocably decide that he shall henceforth be prevented from earning a living in the

practice of the profession which he has followed all his life. I do not know how much authority and power is vested in these gentlemen by the laws of the United States; doubtless the laws under which they act are in themselves wisely drawn. But I do assert, simply as a citizen confident in the just intent of all the laws upon the federal statute-books, that no body of official has the right to deprive a man of his proper means of livelihood without publicly proving upon demand that beyond a reasonable doubt the charges upon which their action is based are not only true, but also sufficiently serious to justify them in pronouncing so severe a punishment. There are other officials higher than district inspectors and other tribunals higher still. It is only fair to say that those who are responsible for the failure of Captain Grant Marsh to receive a renewal of his license that if they are guiding their action by other than proper motives or permitting themselves to be influenced to a tyrannous use of the power intrusted to their hands, forces quite beyond their ability to check will carry the righteous demand for justice to quarters where it will be heard and heeded. When the day of justice comes it is always, without fail, a day of reckoning and a day of woe to her unfaithful servants.

Yours Very Truly,
Joseph Mills Hanson.